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DE RUEHQT #0609/01 2012134
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 202134Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY QUITO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0648
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 8273
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 4223
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 3644
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ JUL LIMA 3320
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL 4494
RHMFISS/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL

UNCLAS QUITO 000609

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [KCRM](#) [KWMN](#) [PGOV](#) [SMIG](#) [SNAR](#) [SOCI](#) [EC](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: ECUADOR: REFUGEE CONDITIONS IMPROVING, BUT
SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES REMAIN

SUMMARY

1. (U) Ecuador hosts the largest refugee population in the Western Hemisphere with 25,000 registered refugees and another 135,000 Colombians living in a refugee-like situation. Colombian refugees have poured into Ecuador as a result of Colombia's conflict for the past nine years. The Colombia-Ecuador border is porous and Colombian refugees continue to enter Ecuador on an individual basis; there are no reliable statistics on the flow. Access to services has improved in recent years, but insecurity, discrimination, lack of adequate housing, and lack of formal employment remain significant challenges to local integration. In March, the Government of Ecuador (GOE) and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) launched the Enhanced Registration program to register 50,000 Colombian refugees in one year. In the first seven weeks, the government registered more than 5,000 refugees, accounting for 20 percent of the total number of refugees recognized since 2000. The program, however, is in jeopardy due to budget shortfalls. The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) has approved an additional \$250,000 contribution to UNHCR to help keep the program going. (End Summary)

2. (U) Kate Pongonis, PRM/ECA Program Officer, and Scott Higgins, Andes Regional Refugee Coordinator, visited Ecuador May 7-11, 2009 to conduct monitoring and evaluation of PRM funded activities, as well as to assess conditions for refugees and asylum seekers living in the northern border region. They met in Quito and the field (San Lorenzo and Esmeraldas) with Government of Ecuador (GOE) officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Internal and External Security Coordination, as well as with PRM-partners UNHCR, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), and Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

Colombian Refugees)- The "Invisibles" in Ecuador

3. (U) Ecuador hosts the largest refugee population in the Western Hemisphere with some 25,000 refugees recognized since 2000. In a survey completed in 2008, UNHCR estimates that another 130,000 to 140,000 Colombians are living in a refugee-like situation in Ecuador, approximately 40 percent of whom are located in the northern border area. Over the past nine years, Colombian refugees have crossed the border into Ecuador as a result of Colombia's drug-funded conflict,

fleeing persecution, threats, murders, deliberate displacement and recruitment by leftist guerrillas, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Most refugees are without documentation, living as "invisibles" in fear of deportation and are unable to work legally.

¶4. (SBU) Luis Varese, deputy representative for UNHCR, told us that policies and access to services (especially health care and education) have improved for refugees in recent years, but significant gaps remain in humanitarian assistance and full access to rights. Insecurity, discrimination, lack of adequate housing, and lack of formal employment opportunities remain the most significant challenges for local integration. The recently completed UNHCR Global Needs Assessment (GNA) estimates that Ecuador requires \$22 million to fully assist refugees for 2009-2011, including \$11 million in 2009 alone.

Difficult Security Conditions on Northern Border

¶5. (SBU) Ricardo Moreno Oleas, vice minister of the Ministry of Internal and External Security, provided a briefing on the security conditions in the northern border region. Moreno noted that despite some 12,000 military and police posted along the northern border, the local and refugee populations still do not feel safe because illegal armed groups (FARC and ELN), emerging criminal bands (Aguilas Negras, Los Rastrojos, and Organizacion Nueva Generacion), narco-traffickers, arms traffickers, and smugglers of other contraband easily cross into Ecuador from Colombia and operate in the northern border

area. The GOE plans to conduct border security surveys every three months to monitor conditions, and is organizing regional cabinets in Esmeraldas and Sucumbios Provinces with the purpose of increasing the presence of State services.

¶6. (SBU) In a separate UNHCR briefing on security, Varese said that the Colombia-Ecuador border is porous and that refugees continue to cross individually ("gota a gota" in Spanish) into Ecuador. No organization -- including the GOE, UNHCR, and IOM -- has a good idea of how many refugees are crossing into Ecuador. An uptick in insecurity in recent years in Narino, Putumayo, and Cauca Departments in Colombia has contributed to the continuing flow. The FARC, and to a lesser degree the ELN, threaten and extort Colombian refugees, local Ecuadorian leaders, local Ecuadorian communities, and indigenous leaders. Confrontations among criminal groups in high receptor communities place refugees and the local community at high risk for violence. Given these difficult security and integration conditions, Varese estimated that some 15,000 refugees will require resettlement to third countries in the next few years.

Enhanced Registration Brings Refugees Out of the Shadows

¶7. (U) Based upon UNHCR's strong recommendation, the GOE is implementing the Enhanced Registration program ("Registro Ampliado" in Spanish) in an effort to bring refugees out of invisibility and provide them better access to their rights. The program, which started in late-March in Esmeraldas Province, will move along the northern border, with stops in Sucumbios, Orellana, Carchi, and Manabi Provinces, with the goal of registering 50,000 Colombian refugees in one year. The program is revolutionary because it takes the registration process to the field and reduces the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) time from nearly a year to a single day, in most cases.

¶8. (U) In the first seven weeks of the program, the GOE's Directorate General for Refugees (DGR) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has attended to 5,398 persons of which 5,243 were issued refugee visas -- an issuance rate of 96 percent. This represents 20 percent of the total number of refugees recognized since 2000 through the regular asylum procedure. The DGR is not making any denials of refugee status during this phase. The 155 persons that did not receive refugee

status due to incomplete information and/or security concerns were referred to the regular asylum process in Quito.

¶9. (U) The Enhanced Registration program is comprised of two mobile teams with a total of 50 staff, supported by PRM-partners UNHCR and HIAS. Approximately 110 applicants are processed each day, including 10 spots reserved for urgent cases. The registration, interview, and status determination takes about two hours to complete. At any time during the process, applicants may be referred for psychological evaluation and counseling with HIAS. A health brigade from the local Ecuadorian Red Cross is normally present during the entire day, and refugee applicants can be referred to a local clinic or hospital if medical attention is required. Applicants we spoke with were elated with the program.

¶10. (U) German Espinosa, Deputy Director of DGR, explained that the Enhanced Registration eligibility commission, which is made up of representatives from government, international organizations, and civil society, uses thematic (e.g., victims of forced recruitment, threats and violence, extortion, kidnapping, and forced displacement by illegal armed groups) and geographic (high-risk municipalities in Colombia) criteria to make the Refugee Status Determination. There are three types of deferred cases that fall within the clause for exclusion: 1) those with links to the armed conflict; 2) those that do not plan to stay in the country; and 3) those that are considered economic migrants. At the end of the day, an applicant receives either a refugee card (which provides full rights, including the right to work) or an asylum applicant card for those deferred to Quito (which provides access to health care and education, but not the right to work).

GOE Dismisses Amnesty Concerns

¶11. (SBU) Ambassador Carlos Jativa, Under Secretary for Multilateral Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told us the Enhanced Registration program had its detractors in the government (especially in the security forces) as being migratory amnesty and a strong pull factor for negative actors (especially the FARC). Jativa dismissed these concerns pointing out that any applicant suspected of having links to illegal armed groups is referred to the regular process in Quito where more robust checks and scrutiny are applied. Jativa added that according to Ecuadorian intelligence services, some 400,000 to 500,000 Colombians)- mostly undocumented)- are in the northern border area at any one time. In this respect, the registration process supports national security interests in that it helps the GOE gather information on who is within its borders.

Refugee Profiles

¶12. (U) According to applicant testimonies, most refugees fled violence by guerrillas and paramilitaries, coming from areas in Colombia where there was little or no State presence. Aerial eradication of coca crops accounted for 28 percent of the refugee claims. Applicants said aerial eradication left them with no means of making a legitimate living because it also indiscriminately destroyed crops such as cacao, yucca, African palm, and plantain. (Note: This is often a result of the practice of interspersing licit and illicit crops. The Government of Colombia offers reimbursement to farmers when legitimate licit crops are accidentally sprayed. End Note.) Many applicants also reported fleeing due to forced recruitment of their children and having to pay extortion ("la vacuna" in Spanish). Confrontation between the Colombian military and illegal armed groups was a lesser cause of displacement. Some 98 percent reported having a relative killed in the conflict.

Regular Asylum Process

¶13. (U) UNHCR is supporting the GOE in strengthening the regular asylum process in Quito in an effort to reduce the processing time to two weeks from the current nine to twelve months. There are 23,000 pending asylum petitions in the regular asylum process, including 16,000 first instance cases and 7,000 appeals. All backlogged and new cases will now be considered using the thematic and geographic criteria from the Enhanced Registration process, and interviews will be conducted on the same day asylum seekers register with the government, rather than having to return at a later date. To handle this additional workload, the DGR will strengthen its Quito office with 14 new personnel, initially paid for by UNHCR and the IOM, at a cost of \$245,000.

Budget Shortfalls Threaten Program

¶14. (U) The \$2.16 million cost for the Enhanced Registration program was supposed to be shared 50-50 between UNHCR and the GOE; however, the government is only able to pay \$85,000 -- leaving an \$823,235 deficit. Without additional funding, the program will not be able to continue beyond July. Representatives from the GOE plan to travel to Canada, Switzerland, the Nordic countries, Spain, and the U.S. in June-July to raise awareness of the government's efforts and to seek more international "co-responsibility" for providing assistance to refugees in Ecuador. The GOE currently spends an estimated \$40 million a year in services for refugees, including education, health, social services, and the regular asylum procedure based in Quito. PRM has already approved an additional \$250,000 contribution to UNHCR to support the Enhanced Registration program.

¶15. (U) After the Enhanced Registration program concludes in Esmeraldas in July, the GOE and UNHCR will hire an independent consultant to conduct an evaluation and draft lessons learned to improve the process before taking it to other provinces. The GOE and UNHCR promised to share a copy of the report.

¶16. (U) This cable was cleared with Andes Regional Refugee Coordinator Scott Higgins.

HODGES